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STAT

AN EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Let's Not Repeat a Bad Mistake

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WE EDITORS need and deserve to be jerked up short occasionally, but the letter from J.A. and J.T. McLean provided more than the usual yank.

It read in part:

"Stop John McMullan's warmongering."

Me a warmonger, a shade of William Hearst whom I abhor? This was reason for reflection, possibly reassessment, even readjustment.

I had never thought of myself as such, but the idea that others were beginning to consider me in that light gave pause.

Where had I mongered?

Was I peddling war when I first suggested nearly three years ago that President Jimmy Carter ought to load the Mariel criminals and misfits on a ship and return them to Havana Harbor?

Or when I wrote a partial defense of Ronald Reagan's harder line toward Cuba and Latin America? Was he not merely trying to clean up the mess left by John F. Kennedy's timidity at the Bay of Pigs and his subsequent promise during the missile crisis not to invade Cuba?

Or when I suggested to President Reagan that he can forever try to cut off the tentacles of communism in Central

and South America, but success isn't likely until he tackles the source of contamination, i.e., Cuba itself?

Admittedly, those suggestions do contain a degree of bellicosity. I defend them, however, as more likely to prevent than precipitate a major conflict.

On the other hand, I've consistently decried any Presidential plan to fight a covert action, in violation of the clear Constitutional provision that only Congress can declare war.

The evidence steadily grows that President Reagan, through the Central Intelligence Agency, is participating in an attempt to overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. For pragmatic as well as philosophical and moral reasons, I oppose such undercover efforts as unworthy of a free and open society.

If my country is going to fight a war, let's do it openly and legitimately in response to hostile provocations that we can document. But, first, that is a decision in which the American public, through its Congress, has a right to participate.

The Herald today makes a major effort to lay out the entire scenario, insofar as we've been able to piece it together, for public viewing.

Herald reporters and photographers, like a few other counterparts in the U.S. media, have risked their lives to keep you as fully informed as we possibly can.

We're not repeating the mistake that, in retrospect, we

and a few other newspapers made in 1962 before the Bay of Pigs disaster diverted the course of history into a quagmire. The Herald was not alone in yielding to White House entreaties and, in misguided patriotism, withholding details of the invasion buildup.

After that failure to unseat Fidel Castro, a chastened President Kennedy ruefully said that had the U.S. press told all it knew, the nation might have been spared the debacle. The United States, he indicated, might have held off and done the job right.

I support President Reagan's increasingly hard line toward Marxist takeovers in our own hemisphere. I do not, however, support the sort of covert action that mocks our own principles and only burrows us deeper into the morass.

We can't afford to slip and slide into the mire of Central America without the American public debating the issue.

We have no business fighting covert wars that we almost certainly cannot win. But we do have legitimate security interests that are threatened by a Russian puppet named Fidel Castro, who thinks that he can export Marxist revolutions anywhere he pleases.

SO do I advocate war?

No, not yet. Not until we have undertaken an overdue step-by-step reassertion of our right to defend ourselves against the steady encroachment of a Marxist aggression that, if unchecked, will destroy the governments of friendly neighbors and ultimately our own.

We have tolerated, without penalty, Cuba's violations of the code of conduct among civilized nations. Had the transgressor been Russia itself, we could not have acted more supinely.

A series of small actions now would send the message to Castro, and to his followers elsewhere, that larger nations have rights, too, that must be respected:

- Advise Castro that his criminals and misfits are being returned, and we will be prepared to enforce the action, if necessary.

- Tighten the embargo, and insist that our so-called allies such as Canada and Britain also respect it.

- Resume surveillance and interdict any arms flow that seeks to undermine the democratic principles that once caused the nations of our hemisphere to band together in pledges of mutual assistance.

THE isolation of Cuba is a stern measure but an achievable goal. It would reduce Castro to appropriate stature and increase internal pressure. It would also cut off the arms flow that sustains foes of democracy elsewhere in Latin America.

Russia would huff, then privately concede in the face of generally approving world opinion, that you win some and lose some — and some have to be forfeited.

At some point, U.S. resolve must be tested. Far better to display it now, openly, in a small arena instead of later in a larger one.